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The U.S. Opening to China: Not Enough Went Through

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WASHINGTON—The first official American comment last week on the seismic shift in the Chinese leadership came from George Bush, director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Mr. Bush mildly acknowledged that his experts had been surprised by the elevation of the relatively obscure Hua Kuo-feng to a position that made him heir-apparent to Chairman Mao Tse-tung. But he said he was confident that relations between the United States and China would not be affected.

Not so long ago, Mr. Bush completed more than a year of residence in Peking as head of the quasi-embassy the United States established there in 1973, so presumably he was qualified to offer that opinion. What he did not say, however, was that during his residence in Peking, neither he nor any of his mission had ever exchanged a word with Mr. Hua. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, on nine visits to the Chinese capital, has also not met the new man.

How then could Mr. Bush or any American feel assured about the future of a fragile relationship that has, essentially, not progressed for three years? The likely answer was fairly sodden with irony; in February a retired American official had been treated to extensive talks with Mr. Hua on a visit to the Forbidden City. That go-between was Richard M. Nixon.

Whatever assurances the traveler conveyed, last week's events could not fail to induce morose reflections among China specialists who believe that Washington has squandered an opportunity to secure its most significant advance in foreign relations in recent years, the opening to China that President Nixon and Mr. Kissinger pioneered with such fanfare in 1972.

Back then the almost universal expectation in Washington and Peking was that the unfinished business of the first Nixon visit, formal diplomatic recognition of Communist rule in China, would be accomplished at an appropriate moment in Mr. Nixon's second term.

American officials clearly understood that this would mean the severing of formal ties with the Nationalist regime on the island of Taiwan—which, to this day, Washington still recognizes as the Republic of China—and the abrogation of a mutual security treaty with Taiwan. In the belief that China would not seek to take over the island by military force, Mr. Nixon had put his signature to a document that explicitly accepted the view that there was only one China.

Implicitly, the document promised that American disengagement from Taiwan would closely follow the American disengagement from Vietnam. But before that pledge could be made good, Mr. Nixon went skidding down the slope called Watergate. Simultaneously, the architect of the new relationship on the Chinese side, Chou En-lai, discovered that he had cancer and attempted to pass on his authority to a Chinese leader who had to be recalled from oblivion, Teng Hsiao-ping.

A Need for Haste

At the end of 1974, Mr. Kissinger seemed ready to try again to consolidate the relationship. With careful ambiguity about his intentions, he scheduled a visit to Peking by President Ford for late the following year. China specialists argued that Prime Minister Chou's illness and the obvious frailty of the aging Chairman Mao meant that the United States would have to hurry if it wanted to secure its Peking connection before the onset of a protracted succession struggle.

It could not be assumed, the argument went, that the relationship would survive such a struggle if Washington failed to make good on the Nixon commitment.

Washington does not like to contemplate Peking's other options, but in a post-Mao era, it is recognized, it is possible that relations between China and the Soviet Union could improve. If Mr. Nixon's vision of the United States and China embarked together on a "long march" to peace has proved to be something of a dream, the possibility of détente between the two great Communist powers is viewed here as a nightmare.

An accommodation that led to a reduction of forces along the Sino-Soviet frontier would open at least the theoretical possibility of a further build-up of Soviet forces in Europe and, conceivably, an intensification of the tepid support Peking extends to "liberation" movements in Southeast Asia—all of which would obviously increase the danger of the United States becoming embroiled in new international confrontations.

Mr. Ford journeyed to Peking last December, but by then two unforeseen developments had canceled watever intentions he or Mr. Kissinger may once have had to advance the relationship on that visit. The first was the abrupt collapse of Washington's client regimes in Indochina. The second was the challenge from the right that Ronald Reagan had raised to Mr. Ford's claim on the Republican Presidential nomination.

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